

Message Text

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ACTION SS-25

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R 281347Z JUL 77
FM AMEMBASSY DAMASCUS
TO SECSTATE WASHDC 4154
INFO AMCONSUL ALEXANDRIA
AMEMBASSY AMMAN
AMEMBASSY BEIRUT
AMEMBASSY CAIRO
AMEMBASSY JIDDA
AMEMBASSY TEL AVIV

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 1 OF 2 DAMASCUS 4797

EXDIS

C O R R E C T E D C O P Y MRN (4797 VICE 4974)

E.O. 11652: GDS
TAGS: MARR, SY, IS, US, XF, PLO
SUBJ: ASSAD LOOKS AT GENEVA

1. SUMMARY:

ASSAD EXPECTS SECRETARY VANCE NEXT WEEK TO ENCOURAGE HIM TO GO TO GENEVA. HE WILL WANT TO ACCEDE TO THE SECRETARY'S REQUEST FOR SEVERAL REASONS. IF EGYPT PROVES READY TO GO TO GENEVA, SYRIA WILL WANT TO FOLLOW. ASSAD HAS BITTER MEMORIES OF WHAT LOSSES ACCURED TO ARAB UNITY AND SUSPECTS THERE WERE DIRECT DAMAGES TO SYRIA WHEN SADAT SIGNED SINAI II. SECONDLY, ASSAD HAS PUT SYRIA AMONG THE MODERATES AND ANY FAILURE IN NEGOTIATIONS WILL GIVE HIS REJECTIONIST ENEMIES POWERFUL AMMUNITION. THIRDLY, ASSAD BELIEVES HE HAS ESTABLISHED A GOOD INITIAL RELATIONSHIP WITH PRESIDENT CARTER AND PRESUMABLY PREFERS NOT TO WASTE THIS ASSET. FINALLY, ASSAD WANTS PEACE, AND IF GENEVA
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APPEARS WAY TO ACHIEVE SYRIAN OBJECTIVES, HE WILL ATTEND THE CONFERENCE. BUT NOT AT ANY PRICE. IF IN GOING TO GENEVA ASSAD APPEARS TO BE ABANDONING THE PLO, HE CAN ANTICIPATE MORE PROBLEMS IN LEBANON AND DANGEROUS FRICTION AT HOME. ASSAD STILL VALUES HIS PERSONAL RELATIONS WITH CARTER BUT THE BEGIN VISIT HAS RATTLED SYRIAN CONFIDENCE IN U.S. INTENTIONS. FINALLY, WITH HIS TROOPS IN LEBANON, HIS ECONOMY STAG-

NANT, AND NO GUARANTEE OF INTER-ARAB COORDINATION, ASSAD IS NOT YET HOLDING ALL THE CARDS HE WOULD LIKE TO HAVE AT GENEVA. UNLESS ISRAEL BUDGES ON THE PLO REPRESENTATION ISSUE, WE EXPECT ASSAD WILL DECIDE AGAINST GOING TO GENEVA. HOW BIG A CONCESSION HE NEED WILL BE PARTLY INFLUENCED BY THE ATTITUDE OF THE OTHER ARAB PARTIES. IN ANY EVENT, WE DO NOT EXPECT ASSAD WILL BE READY TO DECIDE ABOUT GENEVA DURING THE SECRETARY'S COMING VISIT. END SUMMARY.

2. PRESIDENT ASSAD, AS HE CONTEMPLATES THE SECRETARY'S FORTHCOMING VISIT, WILL LOGICALLY ASSUME IN THE WAKE OF PRESIDENT CARTER'S RECENT STATEMENTS THAT THE SECRETARY INTENDS TO ENCOURAGE SYRIAN ATTENDANCE AT GENEVA AT AN EARLY DATE. ASSAD WILL BE WEIGHING UP THE IMPERATIVES PROPELLING SYRIA TOWARD GENEVA AND THE ARGUMENTS AGAINST ITS ATTENDANCE. WE SUSPECT ASSAD MAY BE FINDING IT DIFFICULT TO DECIDE WHICH COURSE IS PREFERABLE.

AMONG THE REASONS FOR GENEVA:

A. ASSAD WILL NOT WANT TO SEE PRESIDENT SADAT GOING IT ALONE ONCE MORE IN THE NEGOTIATIONS. THE SYRIANS FEAR THAT EGYPT NEEDS ONLY THE SMALLEST FIG LEAF DRESSING UP PALESTINIAN ATTENDANCE FOR CAIRO TO RUSH TO GENEVA. SYRIA WILL NOT WANT TO BE TOO FAR BEHIND, ALTHOUGH IT IS ALWAYS HAPPY TO HAVE CAIRO TEST THE WATER. ASSAD HAS BITTER MEMORIES OF SINAI II WHICH HE BELIEVES CONSTITUTED BOTH EGYPTIAN DUPLICITY TOWARDS SYRIA AND WEAKENED THE ARAB HAND

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IN NEGOTIATIONS BY WITHDRAWING THE EGYPTIAN MILITARY CARD. SYRIA IS AWARE IT WILL NEVER BE ABLE TO FACE ISRAEL ALONE MILITARILY AND IF EGYPT UNILATERALLY FURTHER NEUTRALIZES ITSELF AS A MILITARY THREAT, SYRIANS FEAR ISRAEL WILL HANG ONTO THE WEST BANK AND GOLAN FOREVER. THUS, THE SYRIANS MISTRUST SEPARATE NEGOTIATIONS AND PREFER GENEVA, WHERE THEY CAN KEEP THEIR EYE ON THEIR ARAB BROTHERS. ALSO, ASSAD STILL SUSPECTS THAT TO KEEP DAMASCUS OFF BALANCE AFTER IT SPOKE OUT AGAINST SINAI II, WASHINGTON PROCEEDED TO STIR UP TROUBLES FOR SYRIA IN LEBANON AND IRAQ.

B. ALTHOUGH HE ENJOYS THE HARDLINER'S IMAGE, ASSAD HAS COMMITTED HIS COUNTRY TO THE RANKS OF THE MODERATE ARABS WILLING TO NEGOTIATE WITH ISRAEL. FAILURE TO LAUNCH NEGOTIATIONS AT GENEVA WOULD BE CONSIDERED BY MANY AS FAILURE OF HIS PERSONAL POLICY AND JUSTIFICATION OF THE STAND TAKEN BY HIS OWN ALAWITE OPPONENTS, REJECTIONISTS INSIDE THE SYRIAN BAATH AND BY OUTSIDE FORCES LIKE IRAQ AND LIBYA. THIS IN TURN COULD INCREASE PRESSURE FOR A CHANGE IN SYRIAN LEADERSHIP TO BRING SYRIA BACK TO THE RANKS OF THE REJECTIONISTS. WHILE HE COULD PROBABLY COUNT ON THE CONTINUED LOYALTY OF KEY MILITARY UNITS, ASSAD ON BALANCE WILL PROBABLY PREFER TO KEEP THE NEGOTIATING PROCESS GOING.

C. ASSAD ACKNOWLEDGES THE SINCERITY OF PRESIDENT CARTER'S DESIRE TO DEAL JUSTLY WITH THE MIDDLE EAST PROBLEM. WE BELIEVE HE FEELS THAT HIS MEETING WITH CARTER ESTABLISHED A GOOD RAPPORT AND CONSIDERS THAT CARTER'S GOODWILL IS AN ASSET FOR SYRIA. ASSAD IS STILL COUNTING ON THE U.S., IN THE LONG RUN, TO SETTLE THE MIDDLE EAST PROBLEM EQUITABLY AND WOULD PREFER TO AVOID EMBARRASSING THE PRESIDENT THIS EARLY IN THE GAME BY REJECTING GENEVA.

D. FINALLY, AND MOST IMPORTANTLY, ASSAD WANTS PEACE. HE SEES IT AS THE ONLY WAY TO ADVANCE SYRIAN ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT. HE MUST DIMINISH THE BURDEN OF THE PALESTINIAN CAUSE ON HIS INTERNAL AND PAN-ARAB DEALINGS. IF HE SEES A REASONABLE CHANCE HE CAN GET HIS LAND BACK AND AT THE SAME TIME ADVANCE THE PALESTINIAN CAUSE BY GOING TO GENEVA, HE WILL
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TAKE THAT OPTION.

3. AGAINST GOING TO GENEVA ARE SERIOUS AND IMMEDIATE PROBLEMS:

A. ASSAD HAS PROJECTED HIMSELF AS DEFENDER OF PALESTINIAN RIGHTS. ALTHOUGH THE SYRIANS GENERALLY HAVE NO GREAT LOVE FOR THE FRAGMENTED AND HITHERTO UNMANAGEABLE PLO, ASSAD HAS BEEN CAREFUL TO UPHOLD THE PLO AS SOLE REPRESENTATIVE OF PALESTINIAN RIGHTS. WHETHER HE BELIEVES THE PLO CAN CARRY OFF THIS ROLE, HIS BACKING OF THE ORGANIZATION HAS HELPED BLUNT ATTACKS FROM IRAQ AND THE REJECTIONISTS, TO STILL INTERNAL CRITICISM OF HIS MOVE INTO LEBANON AND OF HIS WILLINGNESS TO NEGOTIATE WITH ISRAEL, AND TO ATTAIN A MODICUM OF PLO COOPERATION IN DEFUSING THE LEBANON CONFLICT. SYRO-PLO COOPERATION IS TENUOUS AND BASED ON PUBLIC ADHERENCE TO THE MYTH THAT SYRIA FAVORS A FULLY INDEPENDENT PLO. SYRIAN RESPECT FOR THIS POSTURE WAS RECENTLY ILLUSTRATED WHEN ASSAD'S POLITICAL ADVISOR EXPRESSED SHOCK TO US AT NEWSWEEK CORRESPONDENT DEBORCHGRAVE'S HAVING QUOTED PRESIDENT ASSAD AS BEING READY TO "GUARANTEE" PALESTINIAN BEHAVIOR. HE WAS APPALLED THERE BY ANY PUBLIC SUGGESTION THAT PRESIDENT ASSAD MIGHT MAKE SUCH A PLEDGE, DESPITE THE FACT AN INCREASINGLY CLEAR GOAL OF SYRIAN POLICY HAS BEEN TO MAXIMIZE ITS CONTROL OVER THE PLO.

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ACTION SS-25

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FM AMEMBASSY DAMASCUS
TO SECSTATE WASHDC 4155
INFO AMCONSUL ALEXANDRIA
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AMEMBASSY JIDDA
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B. WHILE THE SYRIANS BELIEVE PRESIDENT CARTER IS SINCERE IN SEARCH OF PEACE, THEY TEND TO DOUBT THAT THE DYNAMICS OF DOMESTIC U.S. POLITICS PERMIT PRESIDENT CARTER MUCH LATITUDE. THESE DOUBTS HAVE BEEN MAGNIFIED BY THE ANNOUNCEMENT OF NEW U.S. ARMS AID FOR ISRAEL WHICH IN SYRIAN EYES WAS EVIDENCE OF CAPITULATION TO THE "JEWISH LOBBY." (ONE OF ASSAD'S ADVISORS HAS SUGGESTED TO US THAT A COLLAPSE IN THE NEGOTIATION PROCESS MIGHT ACT AS A CATALYST FOR AMERICAN PUBLIC OPINION AGAINST THIS "LOBBY," GIVING PRESIDENT CARTER THE BACKING HE NEEDS TO PURSUE THE BEST U.S. (AND ARAB) INTERESTS.)

C. ASSAD HAS PREPARED THE GROUND FOR GENEVA BY MENDING HIS OWN FENCES WITH THE USSR, BY ENCOURAGING PLO FENCE MENDING WITH JORDAN, BY SENDING KHADDAM TO ENCOURAGE FRENCH AND ITALIAN PRESSURE ON THE USG, BY TRYING TO WIND DOWN THE LEBANESE CONFLICT AND BY SEEKING COORDINATE WITH OTHER ARAB GOVERNMENTS. NONETHELESS, HE STILL HAS A LARGE PART OF HIS ARMY TIED DOWN IN LEBANON, HIS ECONOMY IS STAGNANT, AND HIS SECURITY FORCES HAVE BEEN UNABLE TO COPE WITH THE
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HIGHLY VISIBLE SYMBOLS OF INTERNAL UNREST -- EXPLOSIONS AND ASSASINATIONS. FURTHERMORE KING HUSSEIN HAS HELD SYRIA AT ARMS LENGTH AND WE HAVE NO DIRECT EVIDENCE OF ANY SYSTEMATIC, INTENSIVE SYRIAN CONSULTATIONS WITH SAUDI ARABIA AND EGYPT SUCH AS OCCURRED (UNSUCCESSFUL THOUGH THEY WERE) PRIOR TO SINAI II. (MY EGYPTIAN COLLEAGUE ASSURES ME, HOWEVER, THERE HAVE BEEN A SERIES OF UNPUBLICIZED MESSAGES EXCHANGED BETWEEN ASSAD AND SADAT.)

4. IF THERE ARE TO BE NEGOTIATIONS, SYRIA WILL WANT TO BE INVOLVED TO RETAIN CONTROL OVER ITS OWN DESTINY. GENEVA IS A BETTER FORUM THAN MOST ALTERNATIVES IN SYRIAN EYES AND IF IT LOOKS LIKE SYRIA HAS A FAIR CHANCE TO ATTAIN ITS OBJECTIVES THERE, IT WILL PARTICIPATE. HOWEVER, IT WILL NOT DO SO IF IT JUDGES THE COST TOO HIGH. WHEN SYRIA SITS ACROSS THE TABLE FROM ISRAEL, ASSAD WANTS TO HOLD SOME HIGH CARDS OTHER THAN GOOD U.S. INTENTIONS AND SOVIET ARMS. HE MAY NOT BELIEVE HE HAS THESE OTHER CARDS IN HAND YET.

5. UP TO NOW WE DOUBT ASSAD HAS MADE A FINAL DECISION ON THE PROS AND CONS OF GENEVA. HE IS WAITING FOR SECRETARY VANCE. HE WANTS TO HEAR WHAT THE U.S. HAS TO OFFER, ESPECIALLY IF AND HOW THE U.S. INTENDS TO TURN BEGIN AROUND ON PLO REPRESENTATION. FOR ASSAD TO GIVE IN ON THE PLO REPRESENTATION ISSUE WOULD BE A SEVERE PRICE, PARTICULARLY WHEN SYRIA IS NOT AT ITS STRONGEST. WE ARE CONVINCED THAT IF BEGIN'S POSITION ON THE PLO STANDS, I.E., GENEVA WITHOUT THE PLO IN ANY GUISE, ASSAD WILL NOT GO. THE PROBLEMS HE FACES IN ABANDONING THE PLO ARE MORE IMMEDIATE AND MORE DANGEROUS TO HIM PERSONALLY THAN THE PROBLEMS HE WILL FACE BY STAYING HOME.

6. HOW MUCH SHIFT ASSAD NEEDS IN THE ANNOUNCED ISRAELI POSITION
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ON PLO REPRESENTATION TO TIP THE SCALE IN FAVOR OF GENEVA DEPENDS IN PART ON THE OTHER PLAYERS. IT WILL BE EASIER FOR ASSAD IF EGYPT TAKES THE LEAD IN APPEARING ANXIOUS TO GO TO GENEVA. IT WILL REASSURE HIM IF EGYPT AND SAUDI ARABIA ASSURE HIM OF THEIR INTENTION TO MAINTAIN A COORDINATED ARAB POSITION BEFORE GENEVA OPENS AND AFTER NEGOTIATIONS BEGIN. IT WILL HELP ASSAD COVER HIMSELF WITH THE PLO AND HIS OWN INTERNAL OPPONENTS IF IT APPEARS AS IF ASSAD, BY VIRTUE OF HIS FIRM STAND, WON CONCESSIONS FROM ISRAEL ON THE PLO, EVEN IF THOSE CONCESSIONS ARE "PROCEDURAL." (THIS WILL BE PARTICULARLY TRUE IF IT LOOKS AS IF SADAT IS WILLING TO SETTLE FOR LESS THAN HE.) IT WILL ALSO HELP IF ASSAD CAN BE CONVINCED THAT NEW U.S. ARMS AID FOR ISRAEL WAS NOT EVIDENCE OF THE PRESIDENT'S "CAPITULATION TO THE JEWISH LOBBY" AND THAT THE PRESIDENT IS READY TO INFORM HIM OF AN OVERALL U.S. STRATEGY FOR THE MONTHS AHEAD WHICH WILL, INTER ALIA, CONVINCE ASSAD THAT CARTER IS READY TO FACE DOWN ISRAELI PRESSURES.

7. EVEN IF ASSAD IS REASSURED ON THESE POINTS, HE PROBABLY WILL NOT FEEL READY TO DECIDE THE QUESTION OF GENEVA ATTENDANCE EITHER WAY DURING THE SECRETARY'S COMING VISIT. HE WILL WANT TO MULL OVER WHATEVER THE SECRETARY BRINGS, BOTH AT HOME AND IN A ROUND OF INTER-ARAB CONSULTATIONS. HE WILL UNDERSTAND IF FOR OUR PART WE PROPOSE FURTHER ARAB EFFORTS

TO MAKE PLO A MORE ACCEPTABLE NEGOTIATING PARTNER. WE
WOULD NOT EXPECT HIM TO MAKE ANY COUNTER-PROPOSALS AT THIS
TIME OTHER THAN THOSE HE HAS ALREADY TABLED. AND ANY
EFFORT ON OUR PART TO PUSH HIM FOR AN IMMEDIATE DECISION
ON GENEVA RISKS A NEGATIVE RESPONSE. SYRIANS HAVE SHOWN
A REGRETTABLE TENDENCY IN PAST, WHEN CALLED ON TO DECIDE
THEIR ACTIONS UNDER PRESSURE, TO SLIP INTO RHETORICAL
INTRANSIGENCE AND THENCE INTO POLITICAL PARALYSIS. FONMIN
KHADDAM'S REPORTED GRANDSTANDING BEFORE INDONESIAN FONMIN
MALIK TO THE EFFECT THAT SYRIA BELIEVES ISRAEL SHOULD WITH-
DRAW TO THE 1947 FRONTIERS, DOES NOT ACCEPT RESOLUTION
242, AND WON'T GO TO GENEVA UNLESS THE PLO GETS FULL MEMBER-
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SHIP IS ILLUSTRATIVE. THUS, ANOTHER ROUND OF U.S.
TALKS WITH ASSAD BEFORE ANY DECISIONS ARE MADE MIGHT
BE NECESSARY.
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Message Attributes

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